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AUTHOR Seifert, Kelvin L.
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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews four studies about the nature of professional thinking among teachers, and its relationship to parents' thinking about children and education. The main question addressed in the literature was when and why individual diversity of views appears more strongly in some individuals, but uniformity appears more strongly in others. The method of the studies reviewed in this paper were individual interviews, transcribed and analyzed for themes and content. Subjects were combinations of parents, experienced teachers, and preservice teachers. Across all studies there were a total of 14 students, 11 early childhood teachers, and 7 parents. Interviews in every case focused on aspects of psychology and child development. Individual participants were selected deliberately for their experiences as university students, early education teachers, and parents. One common theme was the ontology of the child. Another theme was the epistemology of participants. The outcomes of these studies suggest the need to understand better the factors that create either diversity or uniformity of beliefs. For educating parents and teachers, attending to different philosophical frameworks will have to be part of the agendas for educators of parents and of early childhood teachers. (Contains 19 references.) (WP)

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Coherence and Diversity in Everyday Views of the Child[1]

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Kelvin L. Seifert

University of Manitoba

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Much of the literature on everyday views of psychology has grouped itself around the familiar distinction of individual and society: some studies characterize everyday views as "belonging" to individuals, and others as situated in cultures or social conditions. Among the former is work by Goodnow (1993), for example, who proposes a model of how individual parents come to agree (or disagree!) with their particular children about the meanings of family activities, such as housekeeping. Her research and its framework imply individual diversity as the norm: an assortment of influences causes a diversity of parental beliefs about children.

An example of a socially and culturally oriented account is the work by Harkness and Super (1993) and Harkness, Super, and Keefer (1993) comparing the psychological perspectives of American and West African parents, and by Super and Harkness (1994) describing the psychological viewpoints of mental health professionals. Unlike Goodnow's work, these studies call attention to uniformity within a culture or social group: an entire society (e.g. Americans) or group (e.g. mental health professionals) is described as having "a" view of human nature and child development, one which characterizes and guides the group collectively.

A recent series of qualitative studies sheds light on the relationships between the social and individual perspectives about everyday psychology, as expressed through everyday notions

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of the key psychological term, *child* (Seifert, 1992, 1993, 1994; Seifert and Handziuk, 1993). The studies are part of a program of research concerned with the nature of professional thinking among teachers, and of its relationship to parents' thinking about children and education. They speak in particular to the question of when and why individual diversity of views appears more strongly in some individuals, but uniformity appears more strongly in others. All studies used extended individual interviews, transcribed and analyzed for themes and content. Subjects (or perhaps more accurately, "participants") were in every case some combination of parents, experienced teachers, and/or preservice teachers; across all studies there were altogether 14 students, 11 early childhood teachers, and 7 parents. Interviews in every case focused on aspects of psychology and/or child development: the nature of "the" child, for example, or notions of *development* and *learning*. Details of the methods of interview and analysis are described in the publications cited above. Interviews ranged from one to five in number, depending on the study, and from 30 minutes for the more numerous interviews to 60-90 minutes for the single-session interviews. Individual participants were selected deliberately for their experiences as university students, early education teachers, and/or parents--again depending on the purposes of individual studies.

Although differences in topics and participants obviously created differences in the content of interviews, their analysis explored philosophical themes and dimensions that transcended the individual studies. One common theme, for example, was the ontology of "the" child, or the sort of being a child is thought to be; this theme was organized around a framework suggested by Chi (1990) and Keil (1989) in studies about natural kinds. Another theme was the epistemology of participants: their assumptions and metaphors about the nature

of learning and development. The latter theme was framed by the writings of Pepper (1942), and by the more recent work by Rychlak (1993).

How Diverse Is "the" Child?

In line with other research on this topic, the four studies reviewed here found substantial qualitative diversity in adults' everyday concepts of "the" child. As noted below, however, one group--the experienced early childhood educators--offered much more uniform views than the others. On the face of it, then, the interpretative problem is to understand why this particular group showed uniformity when the others did not. At the end of this article, I will consider this problem; but first let me describe the extent of the contrast between diversity in parents and students on the one hand, and uniformity among early educators on the other.

The parents studied, for example, saw "the" child as a long-term commitment ("50 to 80 years of it!" one parent said). But beyond this common link, they varied substantially in the sort of creature they meant by "the" child. For one parent, for example, "the" child was most accurately considered as a feature of "the" family as a whole, with his or her distinctiveness rather rather secondary in importance (Seifert, 1992). It was the connection to family that mattered--relationships, not uniqueness. The flavor of this attitude was conveyed by Mary Clare in the 1992 study:

> *I think [being a child] is reaching out into the world, coming back to touch base at home, and reaching out again. As the years go by, they reach further, but never stop coming back.... [I remember my infant son] sprawled on the couch. I had towels all over me because he would throw up every time he'd eat. And he had been nursing and he looked up at me with his big, brown eyes, and I knew we were related."*

But another parent in this same study described "the" child as a rather autonomous creature, one with a mind and decision-making powers of its own. As Martha put it in the same study: *She pulls back from you, bit by bit. Later you don't know much about what she's thinking. You just hope she's doing what's best for herself.*

Like the parents, university students showed coherence in their beliefs about "the" child, but simultaneous diversity among themselves--sometimes even to an extreme. In Chris' view, for example, a "child" was in effect little different than an adult; a child was a highly autonomous individual who found his or her own way in life, and especially in school (Seifert, 1994):

> *[The university text says that at age 6] children invent spellings. Well this is not something unique to children. I'm like 27 years old and do the same thing with words I don't know.... I don't think a teacher can [help with everything]; the students have to do some learning on their own--probably most of it....Teachers don't sit and go over [the material] during class.*

Robin, on the other hand, described the child as a sort of abstract idea, one that existed and changed but did not make decisions. For her, "ages and stages" unfolded inevitably and predictably. Like a "fractured textbook," she related a lot of not-quite-accurate information about landmarks of development: children acquire first words at age 2 (not age 1), begin showing interest in peers at age 4 or 5 (not age 2 or 3), acquire interest in boys at age 10 (without exceptions and never later), etc. (Seifert, 1992). Missing from Robin's account was any theory or guiding principles to explain why landmarks emerge when they do. She cited

no emotions or motivations that stimulated human change; and in particular "the" child did not seem to create his or her own development to the extent that it happened in Chris' thinking.

Diversity, however, did <u>not</u> characterize the descriptions by early childhood teachers. Instead their responses conveyed a remarkably uniform meaning for "the" child, one that might be described as *humanistic existentialism* (Seifert and Handziuk, 1993, 1994). From this perspective children had the following qualities, though not necessarily in this order of importance (all quotations below are from Seifert and Handziuk, 1994):

* *ability to make decisions:* "I think that [children] create themselves, adapt themselves...in order to survive" (Cheryl).

  "[The child] can think about what's right and wrong just as well as you and me. We don't give them enough credit" (Darren)

* *uniqueness:* "Teachers have so many problems because [kids] are all so individual and need different kinds of motivation.... So it's hard to keep track of children" (Jane).

* *finitude and vulnerability:* "A lot depends on the situation [of a child]--if you're from a poor family and have to go out and work at 14. It all depends, and sometimes things work out better for some people" (Julia).

Without exception, every early childhood teacher expressed slight variations on these themes when talking about the nature of particular children or of "the" child. Variation occurred only in the strength and articulateness of the sentiments, with novice teachers having less to say than experienced teachers (Seifert and Handziuk, 1993). But the nature or quality of the beliefs were constant.

Why the Uniformity Among ECE Teachers?

It seems, then, that "the" child often means different things to different people--but sometimes it can mean (almost) the same thing to different individuals. Why should this be so? Why should parents and university students differ individually more sharply than early childhood teachers? There are three possibilities, which are not mutually exclusive:

1. **Differential exposure to contradictory cultural meanings:** As Lightfoot and Valsiner (1989) have pointed out, a society makes available an enormous array of meanings and messages, some of which are contradictory to each other. Society will urge parents and teachers to foster independent action in children, for example, but at the same time encourage them to foster cooperation and respect for the groups or communities in which children live. Contradictions like these are never eliminated, but only expressed in different ways at different times and places in society (Winegar, Renninger, and Valsiner, 1989).

According to this line of thinking, the contradictory cultural messages lead to individual diversity. Could this process have happened with the parents and students in these studies, but not with the early childhood teachers? Perhaps the former two groups live more diverse lives to begin with than the latter, and therefore are exposed to a wider array of cultural possibilities.

including contradictory ones. In the long term, "the" child as a cultural construct would become less predictable for parents and students than it is for early childhood teachers.

2. **Greater self-selection in early childhood teaching:** But it is not just that parents, teachers, and students are shaped and (sometimes) diversified by cultural contradictions. Presumably these people also shape their own development, through the opportunities and experiences they create for themselves. Perhaps in particular early childhood teachers have created some of their own uniformity: maybe they have selected themselves into experiences, settings, and occupational communities where they hear and draw support from relatively uniform messages about the nature of "the" child. Not surprisingly, they end up thinking more alike.

There is ample support for this possibility. Like any other occupation, early childhood teachers as an occupational group are subject to powerful social selection factors, especially related to gender (Robinson, 1986; Seifert, 1990). Early childhood education, furthermore, does have a substantial professional literature of its own, one with coherent messages about the needs and abilities of children. One good example of these messages, for example, are the ideas about *developmentally appropriate practice* embedded in official publications of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (e.g. Bredekamp, 1988). "The" child assumed by these statements is roughly the same as "the" child described by the early childhood teachers in the studies by Seifert and Handziuk.

3. **Self-presentation of coherence and uniformity:** Assume for the moment, that both of the above explanations are true. They imply an additional explanation based on social psychological interpretation of interviews as rhetorical events (Mishler, 1986): that individuals

do not--and in fact cannot--reveal their "true, real" beliefs in interviews. Instead they only present selected images or facets of themselves, adjusted to the purposes of the interview. Someone interviewed in his or her capacity as an early childhood teacher, therefore, will present beliefs about "the" child consistent with this role. Yet the same person interviewed in his or her capacity as a parent (or as non-parent or university student or whatever) might present beliefs about "the" child that are quite different.

In the present studies, in particular, the early childhood teachers may have held remarkably uniform views of "the" child because they were playing the role of early childhood educators. The parents and university students were not constrained by such a focused role-enactment. Note, though, that even the parents presented their views of "the" child as internally coherent. Were parents therefore responding to an even more fundamental cultural assumption, that every person should think coherently? Rather different impressions of their diversity might have emerged if the parents and students had been cast in a quasi-psychotherapeutic role: if asked to talk about their doubts and uncertainties about the nature of "the" child. If deliberately asked in this way, would they have still seemed so individually coherent?

Implications for Knowing and Teaching about "the" Child

Considered as a group, the studies by Seifert and Seifert and Handziuk suggest that parents and students are much more diverse in their everyday thinking about "the" child and child development than are experienced early childhood teachers, and that experienced teachers support a relatively uniform version of existentialism with strong humanistic overtones. I have offered speculations about why the teachers in particular were more uniform. These

possibilities have a number of implications, both for research and for educational policies about parents, students, and early childhood teachers.

For Understanding Constructions of "the" Child. The outcomes of these studies suggests that we need to understand better the factors or circumstances that create either diversity or uniformity of beliefs. Can they be identified? To ground this question graphically in these particular studies: can we find early childhood teachers who did select themselves into this field, and compare their beliefs with teachers who did not select themselves into the field? We will, of course, have to know what it means "not to select yourself" into early childhood teaching, yet still teach in it. Perhaps it might mean, for example, that a particular teacher saw no alternative work possible for himself or herself, or that a particular teacher would have strongly preferred to enter another occupation if it had been possible. In any case, the non-self-selected teachers should express a wider range of beliefs about the nature of "the" child--perhaps even as diverse as the parents and students already studied.

Another, easier way to explore the relationship of diversity and uniformity would be to tease apart individuals' self-presentations or roles. In terms of the current studies, for example, we might interview persons with multiple roles--persons who were both parents and teachers, or both students and teachers. These individuals were avoided in the earlier research in a deliberate effort to clarify the impact of particular roles. In retrospect this strategy may have failed because it confounded individuals' self-presentations with deeper beliefs that transcended roles and situations. If so, we might learn more from persons who can speak not only as a parent (for example), but also as an early childhood teacher. Would they express diversity in the first role but uniformity in the second? It would certainly be possible to find out.

For the Education of Parents and Teachers. What do these findings and interpretations mean for educating parents and teachers? The most obvious point has been stated elsewhere: that your neighbor, classmate, or colleague does not necessarily mean what you mean when you both talk of "the" child; you each operate from a different history of experiences, experiences which are constantly reinterpreted in the light of unique individual circumstances (Kavanaugh, 1989). Discussing children with mutual truly understanding will therefore require attending to these differing frameworks. Attending to differing philosophical frameworks will have to be part of the agendas of educators of parents and of early childhood teachers.

Note, furthermore, that achieving a mutual philosophical framework poses a different problem for parents than for early childhood teachers. For a group that is already extremely diverse (like parents or university students), the problem is to *create* a common framework or meaning for "the" child. A group full of diversity must find a meta-language or meta-philosophy for this discussion, one which will account for as many perspectives and understandings as possible, using some common language. They need a common "theory of 'the' child." A group that is relatively uniform (like early childhood teachers), however, already has a common language exists for understanding "the" child. Their problem is instead to appreciate the self-presentational aspect of their discourse about "the" child--the fact that the professionally correct things to say may sometimes gloss over important, sincere differences in perspective. Related to this challenge is the need to understand non-professional perspectives sympathetically, even if they seem wrong-headed in how they conceive of "the" child. Achieving sympathetic understanding of others' frameworks for construing "the" child

requires a very contextually oriented world view (Pepper, 1942; Kavanaugh, 1989). Philosophically, many current early childhood teachers may well be contextualists, but we cannot assume that they all are.

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